

## Evidence for pre-Later Stone Age occupation of the Natal Drakensberg\*

by

Aron D. Mazel

(Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa)

### SYNOPSIS

Evidence is presented in this paper to disprove previous suggestions that there is no Middle Stone Age and earlier occupation above the 5 000 ft contour line in the Natal Drakensberg. Newly discovered artefacts are described and previous reports re-examined.

### INTRODUCTION

In March 1981 a 3-year intensive archaeological site recording programme in the Natal Drakensberg was completed (Mazel 1981). During this programme pre-Later Stone Age artefacts were located and it is felt that they are sufficiently important to be reported. These artefacts appear to be predominantly of Middle Stone Age origin but there may be pieces which belong to the Early Stone Age. These artefacts, and others which have been recovered from previously excavated assemblages will be discussed, and their implications for the prehistoric occupation of the Natal Drakensberg outlined.

The occurrence of Middle Stone Age artefacts in the area has been previously mentioned by Stein (1933) and Holliday (n.d.). Their statements have been ignored, and in recent years several authors, notably Willcox (1974) have commented on the apparent absence of Middle Stone Age artefacts in the Drakensberg. Willcox (1974: 273) has argued—‘it is very nearly certain that it (the Middle Stone Age) does not exist in the Natal Drakensberg, above the 5 000 ft (1 219 m) contour line’, and he has proposed that—‘MSA culture was prevented from penetrating the Natal Drakensberg above the 4 000 ft contour by forest that was too thick for hunters to be able to enter, and that was too dense to harbour any large game other than Bushbuck’. Carter (1976), on the other hand, discussing Middle Stone Age site distribution in eastern Lesotho and the Drakensberg, suggests that—‘it is highly likely . . . that the major factor governing site distribution in eastern Lesotho and the Drakensberg escarpment is not the presence of *Podocarpus latifolius* forest but the amount and duration of snow’ (Carter 1976: 203).

While recent research does not provide further insight into the reasons for Middle Stone Age site distribution it does invalidate Willcox’s (1974) statement on the apparent absence of Middle Stone Age occupation of the Natal Drakensberg, and herein lies its importance.

\* The research for this paper was done while conducting an archaeological survey of the Natal Drakensberg, commissioned and funded by the Directorate of Forestry.

Discussion of the known pre-Later Stone Age artefacts will be divided into their depositional localities. It should be noted here that all the sites mentioned are above the 5 000 ft (1219 m) contour line.

#### EVIDENCE

##### *River gravels*

Large basalt and dolerite artefacts have been recovered from the gravels of the Nkosazana and Masongwane rivers in the north and Skhelekehle and Mlahlangubo rivers in the south. These artefacts are most common where large boulders have impeded their movement downstream and they have accumulated in restricted localities, although in the Nkosazana River similar artefacts were noticed several hundred metres downstream from the major known occurrence. A large representative sample has yet to be collected, but several artefacts were gathered from the Nkosazana River gravels. Most diagnostic of these pieces is a large basalt disc core which has a radius of between 25 and 28 cm, is approximately 7 cm thick and weighs 6,5 kilograms (Fig. 1). It is possible that this artefact predates the Middle Stone Age.

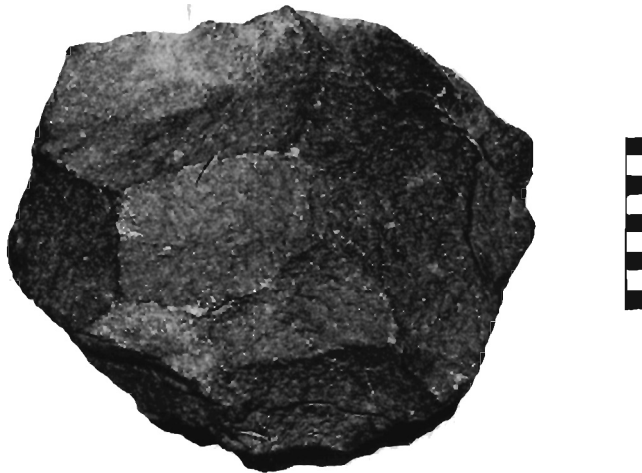


Fig.1. Disc core from Nkosazana Open 2 (Scale in centimetres).

##### *Shelter floors*

Middle Stone Age artefacts were found on the surfaces of two painted shelters, (Bee Shelter and Bramble Shelter) and one non-art shelter (Cathedral Peak Shelter) in the Cathedral Peak State Forest and two non-art sites in the northern Giant's Castle Game Reserve (Dead Dog Caves 2 and 3). Characteristic Middle Stone Age flakes with faceted butts, and which had been utilised, were recovered from the surfaces of Bee Shelter and Dead Dog Cave 2. Fig. 2 shows the flake from Bee Shelter. The artefact recovered from Cathedral Peak Shelter also displayed the characteristic faceted platform, has signs of utilisation and is

irregularly shaped. Investigation of the raw material of these artefacts and the ones from Dead Dog Cave 3 is still in progress. The artefact recovered from Bramble Shelter is an agate disc core which has a 5 cm radius and is approximately 2 cm thick. (Fig. 3). Finally, the Dead Dog Cave 3 artefacts are very large, show signs of retouch and have been utilised.



Fig. 2. Triangular flake with faceted butt from Bee Shelter (Scale in centimetres).

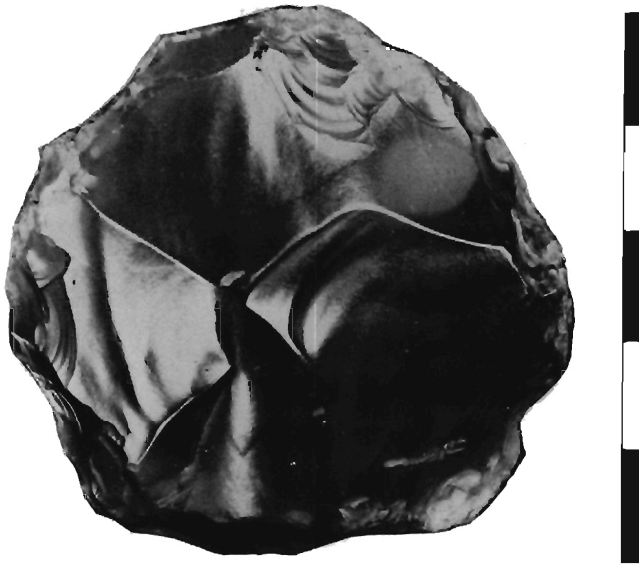


Fig. 3. Disc core from Bramble Shelter (Scale in centimetres).

*Shelter deposits*

Stein (1933: 178), in his discussion of the artefacts recovered from excavations in Eland and Buys caves, states that—‘a few specimens showing typical Middle Stone Age characters, e.g. the faceted butt of a rounded end-scraper and the “oak leaf” edge of a trimmed point from the Cave of the Eland, while the burins from Buys Cave also point to Middle Stone Age.’ However, for the purposes of this report the most significant artefact recovered from these excavations is a disc core recovered from Stratum G, the basalt unit at Eland Cave. The disc core—‘is elaborately worked on both upper and lower surfaces . . . producing a sharp peripheral edge’ (Stein 1933: 171).

Above Stratum G there were 40 cm of tough yellow clay (Strata E and F) which were sterile except for four artefacts, Stratum D which was 20 cm thick and also tough yellow clay from which 54 artefacts were recovered, and finally Strata A, B and C, the main occupation layers, which provided the bulk of the artefacts, which were of Late Stone Age origin. Wells (1933) suggested that the artefacts from the lower units may have worked their way down from the higher units. This is not considered plausible for the presence of the disc core in Stratum G, bearing in mind that there are 60 cm of tough yellow clay between the lower main occupation strata and the basalt stratum. A more acceptable argument is that the disc core recovered from Stratum G was discarded during the Middle Stone Age and the overlying strata were deposited later.

A second occurrence of *in situ* Middle Stone Age artefacts in the Natal Drakensberg was mentioned by Holliday (n.d.: 7) in his preliminary report on his excavation at Main Caves—‘in conclusion may it be stated that the area worked was rich in remains mainly of Smithfield, though Middle Stone Age material was much in evidence in the lower sections of the deposit.’

## DISCUSSION

From the evidence presented it seems that there is a Middle Stone Age, and perhaps even earlier human presence in the Natal Drakensberg. Although most researchers no longer adhere to Goodwin’s (1928) original definition of the Middle Stone Age which would restrict the Middle Stone Age to assemblages dominated by triangular flakes with convergent dorsal scars and faceted butts, the corollary that these artefacts are characteristic of the Middle Stone Age remains valid. Disc cores are known from the Early Stone Age but occur most frequently in the Middle Stone Age and are almost unknown from Late Stone Age assemblages.

Pager (1971) noted that some Middle Stone Age artefacts had been found in his research area (Cathedral Peak and Cathkin Peak areas) but concluded (p. 33)—‘that the possibility exists that these tools were found and reused by Later Stone Age man.’ It is highly unlikely that the large basalt and dolerite artefacts would have been reused by Later Stone Age peoples, and if it is correct that the finer-grained Middle Stone Age artefacts located in the Natal Drakensberg were found and reused by Later Stone Age people the question of where the artefacts were found remains unanswered. Were they used and discarded by Middle Stone Age peoples in the Natal Drakensberg or were they brought in from elsewhere?

In this connection it is of note that the flakes recovered from Bee and Cathedral Peak shelters and Dead Dog Cave 2 showed no signs of reworking but were utilised.

The paucity of pre-Later Stone Age artefacts thus far recovered from the Natal Drakensberg makes it tempting to conclude that the early occupation of this area was ephemeral in nature. A more definite statement on this matter will, however, only be feasible after the completion of further research.

No definite comment is possible concerning the age of this pre-Later Stone Age occupation. In this regard, however, it is of note that the beginning of the earlier of the two Middle Stone Age industries identified by Carter (1978) in eastern Lesotho has been dated to 42 000 b.p. and the termination of the Middle Stone Age in this area to around 20 000 b.p. Furthermore, Maggs (1977: 163), discussing the temporal status of the Middle Stone Age in eastern and southern Africa, states that—'it now appears that the whole of the MSA predates about 30 000 B.C. . . .'. Thus it is not unreasonable to conclude that the pre-Later Stone Age occupation of the Natal Drakensberg predates 20 000 B.C.

#### CONCLUSION

The evidence at hand indicates that there is a perceptible but probably ephemeral pre-Later Stone Age occupation of the Natal Drakensberg. Future research should concentrate on the recovery of large comparative artefact assemblages. Since river gravels and shelter surfaces would be inadequately represented attention should be directed to the exploitation of *in situ* deposits. With data of this nature it may eventually become possible to answer those questions which recent finds pose, and thus furnish us with greater insight into the prehistoric settlement of the Natal Drakensberg.

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